

Fellowship of the Kingdom Pamphlets No. 7.

JOHN WESLEY'S QUEST

BY

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The Fellowship of the Kingdom

1. We must definitely aim at some new Evangelical movement in Methodism which will gather up all that is best in the spirit of our past and apply it, as God shall guide us, through present-day methods to the problems of our age.

2. In this movement our first aim should be to start, in as many places as possible, small groups to supply a frank and living fellowship in a double aim, each of which is essential to the other—a QUEST and a CRUSADE.

(a) We must seek, both as our motive power and as an end in itself, that large and transforming experience of the resources of God in Jesus Christ, which we find in the pages of the New Testament, and which we are convinced God means this age to enjoy. In these groups these resources must be explored and made our own. It is only by this new equipment that the Church can be made equal to the tremendous times in which we live.

(b) At the same time these groups must commit themselves to definite aggressive methods to reach the 'outside.' The methods which suit each particular neighbourhood will be different: they must be discovered and fearlessly applied; but all methods must be dominated by the idea of bringing men and women to personal decision for Jesus Christ.

3. In our efforts we resolve to help one another to the utmost of our power. The old individualism which left each man to tackle the problem of his Church in comparative loneliness must yield to something better: we need a corporate movement in which each man, as far as possible, has behind him the resources of the whole.

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John Wesley's Quest

THE days are past when we can think that within any denominational walls, however ample, the whole of Christian truth can be contained. By a process of enlightenment which has come very lingeringly we have learnt to see that a truth which God has revealed with special illumination to one branch of the Church needs as its counterpart another truth which has been revealed with the same clearness and force to another. This, however, does not diminish the importance of the truth for which each Church stands: as carefully as ever it must guard its precious and unique deposit.

In the case of Methodism there can be little doubt what this deposit is: in its hymns, so rich in the warm and generous colouring of the gospel, a large and triumphant Christian experience finds, noble expression. Methodism has stood for a rich personal experience of God in Christ. It is this which has given to it its unmeasured inspirations, proved the secret of its amazing vitality, and created its most distinctive institution, the class-meeting. And in tones of insistent earnestness it has taught that for this personal experience there can be no substitute. In the end a man can no more be supported by a religion which is not his own than he can by the life-blood flowing in the veins of another.

But it is somewhat paradoxical that while during the last generation a new stress has been laid on religious experience, while there has been a new recognition of its ultimate value and validity, the fund of vital experience in our Church has become alarmingly low. When there has been a marked and sympathetic approach to the very truth for which Methodism stands, that element in Methodism has been steadily decaying.

There is the challenge of the present situation : if only it is true to itself, Methodism can supply the very thing to which our age is turning with a hungry heart—a full and satisfying Christian experience. That lays upon us our immediate task : we must dig down to our roots, and endeavour to recover our original inspirations. It is often over the threshold of past experience that we enter the sanctuary of God, and one way to reach new truth is to establish ourselves firmly in the truth we have.

In this pamphlet an attempt is made to trace the growth of John Wesley's religious experience up to that eventful day when, in his own words, he was converted. A conversion it certainly was both religiously and theologically, for it gave him a new experience and furnished him with a new body of truth.

At the present time Wesley is strangely challenging, because he was the last Englishman who accomplished on a large scale that which needs doing so urgently at the present time. He was one of those grand representative souls who in tackling and solving his own problems solve at the same time some of the problems of his age. He transformed England : he gave to an age, in which even thoughtful observers were persuaded that religion was dying, a new sense of the amazing thing which religion is. The far-reaching effects of Wesley's work are now recognised by historians. John Richard Green thus summarises them, ' The Church was restored to life and activity. Religion carried to the hearts of the people a fresh spirit of moral zeal, while it purified our literature and our manners. A new philanthropy reformed our prisons, infused clemency and wisdom into our penal laws, abolished the slave trade, and gave the first impulse to popular education.' When a great ocean is stirred to its depth, the movement is felt in many a distant creek and bay. Such a moral transformation must be wrought again if our civilisation is to escape the sterility and chaos of which there are so many ugly symptoms, and it is a significant thing that in Anglican circles many are turning with a new wistfulness and longing to that son of their Church who became the founder of Methodism.

One other thing may be noted by way of introduction. There is an immense contrast in the life of Wesley: a period of barren endeavour was followed by a period of amazing effectiveness. From 1725 to 1738 we find in him an immense devotion, a deep fund of moral enthusiasm, but by his own testimony little was accomplished by all this effort. 'I laboured in the fire all my days.' After 1738 there was a dramatic change: the unsuccessful clergyman became perhaps the greatest Home Missionary the world has known: he went through England, as it were with communicable fire, and almost everywhere he left new hearths where believers might gather round the flame he had kindled.

During the last two or three decades the Church has been passing through a barren period: for the energies it has put forth there has been no adequate return: there is some evangelical secret which it seems to have been losing. How this can be relearnt is the vital question of the hour.

In tracing the growth of his experience in his 'Plain Account of Christian Perfection' Wesley commences with the year 1725. He was then in his 23rd year. Previous to this he had been influenced—perhaps more deeply than he felt—by his home, where he was brought up in an atmosphere of 'plain living and high thinking.' His mother, having some intuition of the future greatness of her son, wrote in her meditations, 'I do intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child.' There were also the influences of a Church rich in inherited wealth, and even in a decadent age these cannot have failed to affect a singularly keen and responsive mind. To the end of his life Wesley cherished a deep, unalterable love for the Anglican Church. Writing of the period before 1725 he says, 'I still said my prayers in public and private, and read with the Scriptures several other books of religion, yet I had not all this while so much as a notion of inward holiness: nay, went on habitually, and for the most part very contentedly, in some or other known sin.' Perhaps the colouring is a little too dark, but the words indicate that Wesley was not even aware of the inner secret of the Christian life. But he was

now on the threshold of momentous developments. At Oxford in 1725 and the two following years three masterpieces of devotional literature came into his hands.

Of Jeremy Taylor's 'Holy Living and Dying' he says, 'In reading several parts of this book, I was exceedingly affected: that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts, and words, and actions.' In the next year he met with 'The Imitation of Christ,' or, as Wesley calls it, 'The Christian's Pattern'; again he was profoundly moved. 'The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart,' he says, 'now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw that giving all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this, and go no farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart to Him.' This first impression made by 'The Imitation' never faded from his mind: nearly forty years after this time he said that Thomas à Kempis was next to the Bible*. A few months later—shortly after he had been elected a Fellow of Lincoln College—he came across two books by William Law, 'Christian Perfection' and 'The Serious Call.' Law is one of those exalted and beautiful characters in the contemplation of which the mind loves to linger. He had made religion an inspiration when to the great bulk of his contemporaries it was a problem, he had brought it into the warmer region of the personal and emotional when to others it remained in the more frigid zones of the historical and rational. On Wesley at this time he made a powerful impression, convincing him 'more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian.'

During this period Wesley tells us that for the first time he found a religious friend. The influence of this friendship was evidently profound, for to the sentence in which he mentions it, he adds, 'began to alter the

*A special pamphlet on Thomas à Kempis has been published in the present series.

whole form of my conversation, and to set out in earnest upon a new life,' In his development at almost every stage, as will be seen later, fellowship was a predominant influence: this simple yet touching record marks its beginning.

Two or three years later we are in the presence of a definite Christian Fellowship. A small number of Oxford men banded themselves together in a group: at first there were four of them, and they met occasionally: eventually the number increased, and the friends spent every evening in one another's company. When he returned to Oxford in 1729 John Wesley became the acknowledged leader of this group. The members of it read, studied, thought, and prayed together. On Wednesdays, and Fridays they fasted, and they took the Sacrament once a week. They endeavoured to regulate the whole of their life, and to do everything under the eye of God. Nor was their zeal confined to the devotional cultivation of the spiritual life: they launched out into new activities, visiting the poor and sick, and even penetrating into the darkness and squalor of the prisons. From its very inception the element of the crusade has been present in Methodism.

In the same year Wesley tells us that he began 'not only to read, but to study the Bible as the one, the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion,' and he saw in a clearer and clearer light the indispensable necessity of having 'the mind which was in Christ' and of 'walking as Christ also walked.' This statement is followed by a sentence in which he indicates the position he had reached, 'This was the light, wherein at this time I generally considered religion, as a uniform following of Christ, an entire inward and outward conformity to our Master.' This is a strangely instructive piece of criticism, for during the last generation many strong tendencies have taken us in the same direction. We have witnessed a movement which has called us back from Paul to Jesus, from the Epistles and fourth Gospel to the synoptic Gospels. Writers of influence have urged that Christianity has been disturbed by many additions which do not belong to its

original impulse, that the old simplicity must be restored, and that the root of it must be found afresh in the simple though profound and revolutionary teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven and in the ethical following of Jesus. These tendencies have had large and beneficial results. A new vision as to what the Kingdom of Heaven means has dawned in many minds: an immense flood of light has been turned on to the Gospels: Christian ethics appear in a new grandeur, and with an immense range of application, and as regards our Lord Himself we have 'a clearer view of His form,' and a more intimate knowledge of His life than has been possible since Apostolic days. All this may be gratefully admitted; but if we confine ourselves to this interpretation of Christianity, we are where Wesley was in 1729, and the distinctive elements in Methodism have not emerged.

In 1735 Wesley sailed to Georgia: he is, perhaps, the strangest missionary who has ever left our shores. He went out because he was troubled about his own soul. In a pathetic but sublime sentence he says, 'My chief motive in going abroad is the hope of saving my own soul.' Such a remark reveals the immense resolution with which he pursued his Quest. He felt dimly that in spite of all his devotion, he had not found God, and he was borne along by the conviction, which is the morning-star of the gospel, that God could be found. To his Quest Wesley ungrudgingly gave fourteen of the most fruitful years of his life. No man to whom a large mission has been entrusted finds the way into it easy, and often he who waits longest is the man who gets most.

The voyage to America introduced him to the Moravians. The quiet and undaunted spirit shown by their women and children in a storm made a powerful impression upon him, and this was deepened by his meeting with Spangenberg, a Moravian elder in Georgia. He asked Wesley whether he had the witness of the Spirit within. Such a question was altogether a novel one to Wesley, and he was at a loss for an answer. Spangenberg continued, 'Do you know Jesus Christ?' and when

Wesley answered, 'I know that He is the Saviour of the world,' the former replied, 'True, but do you know He has saved you?' Wesley was full of perplexity, but answered, 'I hope He has died to save me.' He was thus brought face to face with the two kindred truths which were to be his dominant themes, the Witness of the Spirit, and the Assurance of Salvation in Jesus Christ. It is not easy to understand how these two doctrines had previously escaped him. That so acute and penetrating a mind should have been studying the Bible for many years, and yet have utterly missed vital Christian truths is extraordinary. The fact of the Witness of the Spirit had been suggested to him by the striking words of his dying father, 'The inward witness, my son, the inward witness, that is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity,' but with characteristic sincerity he tells us that he did not at that time understand them. Without a soil prepared to receive it the seed of the gospel is sown in vain. Are there vital truths which we are overlooking? Do the deepest words of the gospel fail to convince us because we do not understand them? These are two far-reaching questions which Methodism has to face.

Such was Wesley's first intercourse with the Moravians: it acted as a ferment in his soul, bringing into clearer consciousness the fact that there was something in Christianity which he had not found. At any rate, with a chastened sense of disappointment and failure he returned to England early in 1738. During the voyage he wrote the following words, 'By the most infallible of proofs, inward feeling, I am convinced of unbelief, having no such faith in Christ as will prevent my heart from being troubled.'

At this time he describes himself as being 'almost a Christian': he had 'the faith of a servant, though not the faith of a son'; but the bright morning-star of this latter faith was soon to appear. Wesley has particularly noted the day, February 7th, 'a day much to be remembered,' on which he met Peter Böhler, the Moravian, who disclosed to him the secret of justifying faith. The two had several conversations, for Wesley

lost no opportunity of seeing him, and it was quickly seen that they occupied different stand-points, Wesley reasoning, while his companion talked of faith. Böhler at length, cried, 'My brother, my brother, you must get rid of that philosophy of yours.' Wesley was astonished to learn that true faith in Christ was accompanied by victory over sin, and by a constant peace, flowing from the assurance of forgiveness. This was something so altogether novel and startling that he challenged it, and Böhler referred him to the Bible. On March 24th he took up his New Testament, resolved to bring the new doctrine to the test. To his amazement he was bound to acknowledge that Böhler was right. It was Böhler also who brought him into touch with three persons, 'all of whom testified of their own personal experiences that a true living faith in Christ is inseparable from a sense of pardon for all past and freedom from all present sins.' About the same time he introduced Wesley to something further of which previously the latter had been in ignorance, that saving faith is given in a moment. This, at first, Wesley would not accept, but upon examining the New Testament he was startled to find that it knew little or nothing of any conversions, except such as were instantaneous. He then fell back on an argument which is strangely significant of his state of mind, 'God wrought thus in the first ages of Christianity: times are now changed.' Böhler, however, brought to him several persons who witnessed to this very fact that in a moment they had passed out of darkness into light. Wesley now surrendered: he had already been 'clearly convinced of unbelief': now he ceased all his disputing, and cried, 'Lord, help Thou my unbelief.'

The satisfaction of his Quest soon followed: it can only be described in the words which Wesley has made classical: 'In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did

trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.'

What exactly did Wesley derive from his contact with the Moravians? The two doctrines by which he roused England to new life were those of Justification by Faith and the Witness of the Spirit. Both came to him through Moravian channels, but they were not distinctively Moravian doctrines. What Wesley learnt from the Moravians had come from Paul through Luther. The truths to which, in the providence of God, Böhler introduced him are the very same which transformed the monk Luther into the champion of the Reformation. It was Luther who after a long, dark, and lonely struggle in his monastic cell had wrested from the dead theology of his time the doctrines of Justification by Faith and Inward Assurance. Turning these into living and fruitful realities, he set in motion forces of which even now we cannot see the ultimate consequences. Through the Moravians the fire was kept burning brightly when in many other quarters it was smothered in ashes, and this flame kindled Wesley. It is a significant fact that the conversion of both the Wesleys was connected with Luther's works.

Two questions remain, What was it Wesley found? and why had he missed it for so long? The former question need not detain us, because an answer has already been given to it in two pamphlets in this series* On the evening of May 24th he found what God has freely offered to man in Jesus Christ. The authentic New Testament experience, 'a new, transforming, and communicable experience of God in Christ,' became *his own* inward possession. It brought forgiveness, renewal, and immense assurance: it opened up new ranges of life, new avenues of possibility: it gave him a new consciousness of God 'omnipotently near,' and it was charged with the missionary impulse. The good news as to what was possible for man had to be

* 'Our Methodist Heritage' and 'The Quest.'



told : Wesley could not keep it to himself. In spite of himself, it may almost be said, he became an evangelist. The quest passed into the crusade.

But how did he miss for so long what he afterwards saw to be vital Christian truth ? In accounting for this three things may be pointed out.

In the first place the low religious vitality of the Church was a terrible handicap to one seeking to discover the root of the Christian life. In the first three decades of the 18th century religion was at a low ebb : and the atmosphere of unbelief and scepticism was almost fatal to that abounding expectancy which is the portal to the Kingdom of God : it nipped as with a chilling frost that large and expansive faith which embraces Christ and all that He offers. We discern the deadening influences of this on Wesley from a remark he made to Peter Böhler, ' God wrought thus in the first ages of Christianity : times are now changed.' He did not believe it possible that God would work as powerfully in the 18th century as He had done in the first. There is something almost ironical in this unbelief : for he was standing on the very threshold of events which were to furnish the Church with a new appendix to the Acts of the Apostles.

In our time once again the Church has slipped into carelessness, apathy, and unbelief : its vitality is impaired : its aspirations are clouded : its noblest powers are in partial abeyance. We have grown up—at any rate this is true of the younger generation—in a period when the Christian consciousness has been slumbering. Have we, like Wesley, lost our sense of the amazing resources of the gospel ? Have we ceased to expect God to work in our days as He did in the first age of Christianity ? Apostolic fervour and conviction only come to those who have a vivid and haunting sense of God's intimate and immediate concern with human life.

In lifting men above the deadening influence of an age which has lost something of its faith there is no inspiration like fellowship. At almost every critical stage of Wesley's development we find him in fellowship both with those who were seeking and with those who

had found. The influence of this was incalculable. It was no accident which caused him to make fellowship the nerve of the society which he called into being. He had himself learnt the best truths, which some one has well said are also the simplest, in the School of Fellowship. First of all his early religious friend, then the Oxford Group, thirdly, Spangenberg, and at a later stage Peter Böhler, and lastly the fellowship group in Aldersgate Street, all coming at the critical points in his development, show us how much Wesley owed to an influence the re-discovery of which in many lives is one of the most hopeful signs of our times.

The most obvious way of escape from our present barrenness and ineffectiveness is for those who have become conscious of it to draw together in small informal groups and fellowships. By this means the temperature will soon be raised, and an atmosphere will be created which will foster faith. As soon as we get outside ourselves, and the narrowing limitations of our individuality into a group-consciousness, a new sense of possibility springs to birth. The weakness of one is re-inforced by the strength of another: the hesitations of one member by the certainties of another: a body of contagious truth is slowly wrought out by many minds working together, each contributing its little fragment. There are many who during the last few years have been lifted into a new world through the fellowship of a group: they have come to believe what they had persuaded themselves they never could believe, and they are beginning to attempt tasks which they never even imagined they could tackle. To create such groups should be one of our constant endeavours. If they can be brought into existence on an adequate scale, our present staleness will soon be a thing of the past, and where now there is stagnation the everlasting springs will begin to flow.

In the second place, the very simplicity of the gospel is a stumbling-block, which prevents many from reaching it. If God's offer was not so thorough-going and complete, if it left more for man to do himself, many would find their way into it far more readily. That God's

offer of a forgiveness which covers the past, and of a present companionship with Him which fills life with new depth and meaning, is (to the repentant and responsive) as free as the air, bounteous as the light, is what average human nature finds it exceedingly difficult to believe. Faith means simple acceptance: if it meant doing some hard thing, many would find it much more readily. This was true of Wesley. For many years, like the Apostle Paul, he was trying, with immense energy and sacrifice to do for himself what only God could do for him, and in his own expressive phrase he tells us, 'I laboured in the fire all my days.' The account which Peter Böhler gave of him is instructive. Speaking of the two brothers he said, 'The elder, John, is a good-natured man: he knew he did not properly believe in the Saviour, and was willing to be taught Our mode of believing in the Saviour is so easy to Englishmen that they cannot reconcile themselves to it: if it were a little more artful, they would much sooner find their way into it.' To use the language of the New Testament Wesley tells us that he was seeking salvation by works, and not by faith: he was trying to win it for himself by personal effort which at times scaled the heights of heroism, instead of simply receiving it in faith from the hand of God.

There are many at the present time who seem to be very much where Wesley was from 1725 to 1738. They have a zeal for God, a loving interest in the Church, a large measure of devotion to Jesus Christ: their works and activities are many, but it is to these works that they are looking for salvation—with this result, that like Wesley they are labouring in the fire. They know that something is wrong, without knowing exactly what it is, and they are filled with a vague but lowering dissatisfaction.

The same subtle yet dangerous tendency can be discerned in much modern preaching. Many sermons are predominantly ethical, spiced with a little religious sentiment: their chief text is service: congregations are told to work out their own salvation in the service of mankind. Unconsciously, salvation by works is

being preached, and the same spirit is manifest in most of our efforts. When the sense of failure has become acute, a new scheme is started with the intention of setting people to work. For a time the new spell operates, but when the paroxysm of energy passes away it is seen that nothing has been accomplished except to organize people into a new despair. We do not pause and ask whether there is not something radically wrong with a scheme of salvation which has brought us to the present impasse.

Reference has been made to the formation of new groups and fellowships. It is now plain with what subject they must grapple. If they meet together to plan new activities, they will end ingloriously in new exhaustion. Before they seek to do, they must begin to find the real meaning of the gospel.* To discover afresh what faith in the evangelical sense means they must accept the amazing offer which God has made to man in Jesus Christ, and find in it the good news to which a disappointed and distracted age will not turn a deaf ear, and that large equipment by which they will be able to match the tremendous times in which they live. The men for whom our age is looking are those who feel that there is no limit to what God can do for them and through them!

In the third place, Wesley did not previous to 1738 understand the evangelical meaning of the Cross. As a way of life for the Christian disciple he had long been deeply and fervently conscious of it. No thoughtful reader can come away from the pages of Thomas à Kempis without taking with him the vision of the Crucified, and from the time that he read 'The Imitation of Christ' we find Wesley taking up his cross, and following Jesus; but it was not until many years had passed that he found what God freely offers man through the Cross—the redeeming energies, the saving power, which in some way that perhaps we can never understand

*A special paper on 'The New Testament Experience of God in Christ' (Price twopence) has been prepared for use in Groups. Copies can be obtained from the Secretaries.

the Cross has set at man's disposal. It was Peter Böhler who brought home to him that through the Cross something had been done by God Himself which dealt finally and triumphantly with human sin, and which man had only to appropriate in faith. When Wesley began to follow this new star, he was not long in finding his way into the haven of the gospel. And the Methodist Revival is but one of many great movements in Church History which prove to us that the Cross is 'the piercing-point of the gospel.'

At the present time there is one convincing sign that our experience of the Cross is unsatisfactory. So often we hear it said that the doctrine of the atonement needs restatement, that we want new words and phrases in which to express the truth about it. Many seem to be waiting for such a re-interpretation. But if only our grasp of evangelical truth was deep and earnest enough, there would be little difficulty in finding the right words in which to express it. As Goethe has truly said, 'If a man is in earnest what to say, has he to hunt for words?' Our longing for re-statement is an index of an even deeper longing—a longing for a living experience of what the Cross means: our restless search for new words and phrases is the outcome of a more fundamental search for a new sense of its quickening power. Far too long we have been seeking a satisfactory theory of the Atonement when our vital need was a satisfying experience of the Cross, and nothing is more essential than to grapple once again with its evangelical aspects. There are many in the younger generation who cannot, at any rate at present, accept all that Wesley says about the Atonement. Let them be careful not to be turned aside from the Cross itself, because certain statements about it are difficult to accept: let them get behind even the phrases of the New Testament to that amazing fact which the writers of it were struggling to express.

Here lies the way forward: the word which will speak deliverance to our age is what Paul calls 'the word of the Cross.' We have to explore it afresh. It has been truly said that even what we inherit from our

fathers we have to discover for ourselves, if we are really to possess it. We must seek afresh to find the meaning of that unique event in human history which is 'the power of God unto salvation.'

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But delivered Him up for us all,
How shall He not also with Him
Freely give us
All things?'

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